

Wanderlust  
TOP 5  
GUIDE

# Guatemala's highlands

Volcano-flanked Lake Atitlán, the colonial charms of Antigua, exuberant Maya markets... welcome to quintessential Central America. **Claire Boobyer** picks the very best of Guatemala's wonderful western highlands



**TRAVEL  
MORE,  
PAY LESS**





**Thank you for smoking** Paying respects to the idol Maximón in Santiago Atitlán

**M**aximón reminded me of Father Christmas. I had paid a few quetzales to enter the idol's grotto, which was ablaze with flashing fairground lights and sputtering candles. The room was lined with glass coffins containing painted statues of the reclining crucified Christ, and the air jangled with the sound of jingle bells, provoking a shuffling of the maize cobs rammed into the rafters.

All around, kneeling devotees appealed to this cigar-smoking, rum-drinking idol for goodness and success in their lives. Then, with an untimely kerfuffle, we were asked to withdraw from his guardian's house in the town of Santiago Atitlán. I, along with all the other pilgrims, was directed to the nearby lake to watch the washing of Maximón's clothes – an annual public soaking in Easter Week, carried out before he moves house and guardian.

Today, the mystical rituals of the Maya infuse any experience in the Western Highlands. Amid the conical volcanoes and market towns, descendants of the ancient Maya, dressed in

colourful, exquisitely embroidered clothes, till the high-slung maize fields, live their lives according to time-honoured calendars, and pray at the home of idol Maximón.

At the heart of the Western Highlands is Lake Atitlán, created by a super tectonic blast. This ancient high-altitude crater lake now sits surrounded by three younger volcanoes and shelters Maya communities, backpacker hangouts and therapeutic retreats.

The Spaniards were no less immune to the charms of a fertile region where chocolate beans were used as payment. They built the first and finest planned city in Central America – Antigua – where squat houses lined cobbled streets, baroque churches towered over columned convent courtyards, and

handsome civic architecture bestowed grandeur on a city standing under the gaze of several volcanoes.

An 18th-century earthquake wrecked this maiden colonial city, but its skeletal elegance was trapped in time – and its 20th-century renaissance has drawn tourists to the city, and its surrounding region, in their thousands. Here's where to experience Guatemala at its best. >

## Maya groups

The western highlands' large Maya population is not just one people. More than a dozen different Maya groups live here, with distinctive languages, customs and dress. K'iche' is the biggest, with around a million speakers.



### CHICHICASTENANGO

This characterful highland town of winding streets and red-roofed houses is the spiritual and shopping hub of the Maya K'iche'. Come for religious rituals and its popular market (Thursdays & Sundays).

### TODOS SANTOS CUCHUMATÁN

Visit this Mam-speaking highland Maya town for the spectacle of the annual horse race, and the vibrant reds and pinks of the locals' *traje* (costume).

### LAGUNA CHICABAL

Climb to the sacred green waters of this lake, in the crater of an extinct volcano, and watch for the will-o'-the-wisp cloud dance over the surface.

### IXIL TRIANGLE

Trek in this remote area – in a region defined by the three communities of Nebaj, Chajul and Cotzal – populated by the Ixil Maya, whose women wear a stunning costume and headdress of rainbow colours.

## Guatemala's highland highlights

Numerous buses head west from **Guatemala City** along the Carretera Interamericana, which sweeps up into the highlands and connects the main towns (you'll need to detour slightly south for **Antigua**.) North of the highway is **Chichicastenango** and the **Ixil Triangle**, south is **Lake Atitlán**, while further west is Guatemala's second city **Quetzaltenango** (Xela) – a good base for visiting local villages. With no shortage of small-scale accommodation, this a great region for independent travellers.



### ZUNIL

Pay your respects to the idol Maximón, visit the market, then soak your tired limbs in the *alfresco* thermal baths that steam amid lush vegetation on the flanks of Pico Zunil volcano.

### SANTIAGO ATITLÁN

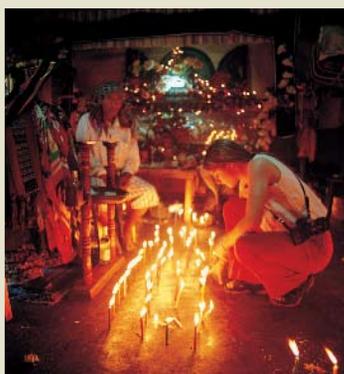
Admire the weaving and embroidered birdlife on men's trousers at this Tz'utujil Maya town perched on the lakeshore – also a religious centre for Catholics and Maximón worshippers.

### LAKE ATITLÁN

Board a boat to visit the Maya communities on the shores of this blue crater lake surrounded by three conical volcanoes – considered by writer Aldous Huxley 'the most beautiful lake in the world'.

### ANTIGUA

Delve in among the ruined churches and columned courtyards of this Unesco-listed Spanish colonial city, dominated by three volcanoes, and preserved in time by an 18th-century earthquake.



## Guatemala Highlands Top 5...

### The best of Antigua

**1** Around Antigua's **Plaza Mayor** the conquistadors built an embellished, honey-hued cathedral, a colonnaded Captain General's palace – mirrored in the smaller town hall opposite – and the giant Casa del Conde, with attractive interior patios. Nearby is the handsome Casa Santo Domingo ([www.casasantodomingo.com.gt](http://www.casasantodomingo.com.gt)), a 16th-18th century former Dominican monastery. For the insider's take on Antigua's colonial realm, walk with connoisseur Elizabeth Bell (US\$20/£12.90; +502 7832 5821, [www.antiguatours.net](http://www.antiguatours.net)).

**2** Rest your head at the gorgeous, artfully decorated petite boutique **Casa Encantada** (9a Calle Poniente Esquina #1; +502 7832 7903, [www.casaencantada-antigua.com](http://www.casaencantada-antigua.com)). Breakfast on the roof terrace is a treat. Doubles from US\$79.30 (£51).

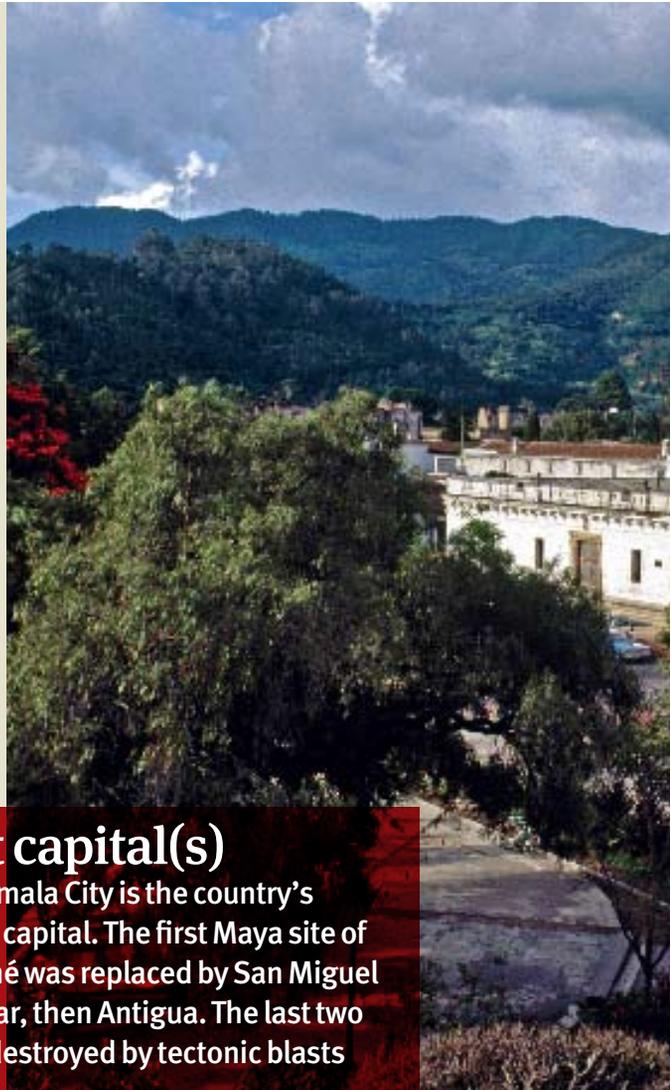
**3** With delightful dishes (try duck fillet in dark-chocolate sauce accompanied by red port wine and prunes) and the ambience of elegant candelit dining under the Spanish colonial arches, **Mesón Panza Verde** offers an unmissable dining experience (5a Av Sur #19; +502 7832 2925, [www.panzaverde.com](http://www.panzaverde.com)).

**4** Several blocks south of the centre, escape to a verdant corner flourishing with flowering tumbergia: at the **Vivero y Café de La Escalonia** (5a Av Sur Final #36 'C'; +502 7832 7074, <http://laescalonia.com> – Spanish), sip herbal teas on the garden furniture, then potter about the old coffee plantation.

**5** Save your quetzales for the **Casa de los Gigantes** (7 Calle Oriente #18; +502 7832 0685, [www.casadelosgigantes.com](http://www.casadelosgigantes.com)), an artisan emporium selling everything from kitchenware to textiles, masks and decorative ornaments.

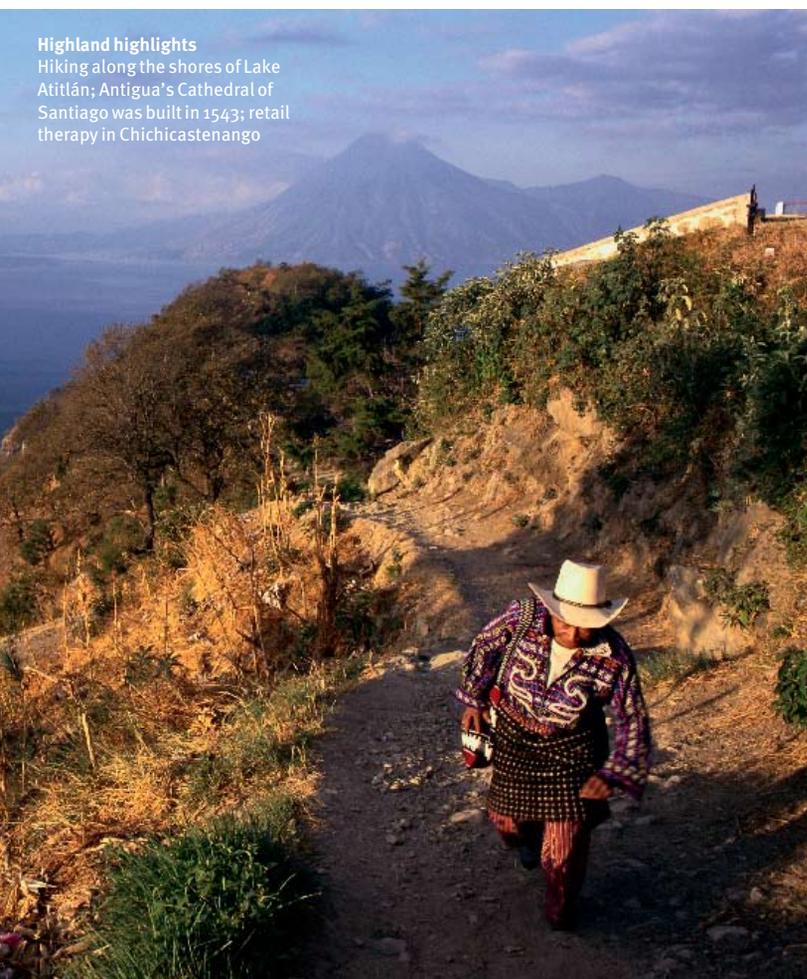
### Just capital(s)

Guatemala City is the country's fourth capital. The first Maya site of Iximché was replaced by San Miguel Escobar, then Antigua. The last two were destroyed by tectonic blasts



#### Highland highlights

Hiking along the shores of Lake Atitlán; Antigua's Cathedral of Santiago was built in 1543; retail therapy in Chichicastenango



### Active adventures

**1** Guatemala is a geological hotspot; one of the country's most active volcanoes is Pacaya, south-east of Antigua. Climb the volcanic slopes early in the morning to avoid the crowds with Old Town Outfitters (US\$44; +502 5399 0440, [www.adventureguatemala.com](http://www.adventureguatemala.com)) before scree surfing down the crunchy flanks on the homeward stretch.

**2** Trek around the small highland towns of Nebaj, Chajul and Cotzal – the Ixil Triangle – with community group Red Laval Iq' (Q1,200/£98 to Q1,800/£148; +502 5365 1790, [www.regionixil.com](http://www.regionixil.com) – in Spanish, [redlavaliiq@gmail.com](mailto:redlavaliiq@gmail.com)). Guided by locals along paths where you'll see Ixil women carrying wood and crops on their backs, and learn about the history (the area was devastated during the 36-year civil war) and environment before bedding down at a homestay and taking part in daily tasks in the kitchen, at the loom or in the fields.

**3** Walk the high-slung, narrow lake trails around Lake Atitlán – the perfect antidote to stressful living. For stunning views, blooming flowers and locals at work, wander between the towns and villages of Santa Cruz La Laguna, Jaibalito and Tzununá, ending with a cold beer at Lomas de Tzununá (+502 5201 8272, <http://lomasdetzununa.com>) overlooking the lake.

**4** Horseride with Unicornio Azul across the Cuchumatanes Mountains, north of gateway town Huehuetenango, passing remote mountain villages untouched by tourism (Q90/£7.40 to Q130/£10.70 per hour; +502 5205 9328, [www.unicornioazul.com](http://www.unicornioazul.com)).

**5** Feeling the volcanic hot spots at the bottom of Lake Atitlán – considered the womb of the world by the local Tz'utujil Maya – is an exciting high-altitude dive experience. Contact ATI Divers at La Iguana Perdida (Santa Cruz; dives US\$30; +502 5706 4117, [www.laiguana Perdida.com](http://www.laiguana Perdida.com)).



## Ways to make a difference

**1** Want to burn calories, watch live volcanic eruptions and help street kids? Walk through the highlands from hub town Quetzaltenango (known as Xela) to Lake Atitlán over three days with **charity Quetzaltrekkers** (+502 7765 5895, [www.quezaltrekkers.com](http://www.quezaltrekkers.com); minimum donation for trek Q600/£49) or hike to base jungle camp at Santiaguito volcano to watch this spitting, sputtering and smoking youngster (Q350/£29). All profits support a school for street children and other similar projects.

**2** The insightful **cultural tour of the lakeshore town of San Juan La Laguna** is run by community organisation Rupalaj Kistalin (Q110/£5 per person; +502 5964 0040, [rupalajkistalin@gmail.com](mailto:rupalajkistalin@gmail.com)) which aims to improve living conditions for the town's Tz'utujil Maya. Visit natural-dye weavers, a medicinal plant project, artists and, if you need help, the local idol Pedro Simón.

**3** Climb the slopes of **Agua volcano** with **farmers** from San Miguel Escobar village to inspect the coffee bushes before learning how to roast and grind. As Green as it Gets Coffee (half-day tour US\$25/£16; +502 5663 9764, [www.asgreenasitgets.org](http://www.asgreenasitgets.org)) supports independent local farmers.

**4** Visit **off-the-tourist-trail Totonicapán, a Maya K'iche' town**, with the active Aventura Maya K'iche' organisation (US\$77/£50; +502 5630 0554, [kiche78@hotmail.com](mailto:kiche78@hotmail.com)). These community tours include homestays and unique chances to see traditional music and dance, with the exuberant steps and elaborate costumes explained, plus a trip to a dance mask factory.

**5** Budding entrepreneurs, tour guides, artists, builders and vegetable gardeners would do well to hook up with the **volunteer programme run by CasaSito** (+502 78824680, [www.casasito.org](http://www.casasito.org)), whose aim is poverty alleviation in Maya communities.

## Spoken word

There are 25 languages spoken in Guatemala, 22 of them Mayan. The others are Spanish, Garífuna and Xinca

## Markets

**1** The biggest market blowout in Guatemala is the Thursday and Sunday assembly of **artesanía** stalls at **Chichicastenango**, a large Maya K'iche' town. Arrive early to avoid the tourist crowds – and stay the night to get the end-of-day deals on textiles and wooden items galore.

**2** At the **Friday market in highland town San Francisco El Alto** buy a signature woollen blanket, then climb above town to see the animal market, where dozens of pigs and poultry, pups and kittens await sale.

**3** The Mam people of **Todos Santos Cuchumatán** gather on Saturdays for their weekly market. The locals wear one of the most beautiful traje in Guatemala – not least the men's intensely coloured, embroidered wide collars, scarfed hats and red-and-white striped trousers, the height of sartorial elegance. Stunning patterned textile bags can be bought in town.

**4** Bus up the hill from gringo town Panajachel to the **untouristy Kaqchikel town of Sololá**. On Tuesdays and Fridays thousands descend on the market from the surrounding area; the colourful, varied traje is a visual delight.

**5** **San Juan Comalapa's Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday markets** are visited by locals in full traje. This small town is also famous for its *naif* art; there are several galleries, including the Casa de Don Andrés Curruchich (+502 5766 3874, [alexmargin@gmail.com](mailto:alexmargin@gmail.com)). ▶

## ◀ Learning experiences

**1** **Las Pirámides del Ka, a meditation centre** on the lakeshore at San Marcos – a peaceful village with other centres of therapy and beautiful views. The centre offers spiritual renewal programmes from one day to three months (course including accommodation from US\$16/£10.30 per day; +502 5202 4168, [www.laspiramidesdelka.com](http://www.laspiramidesdelka.com)).

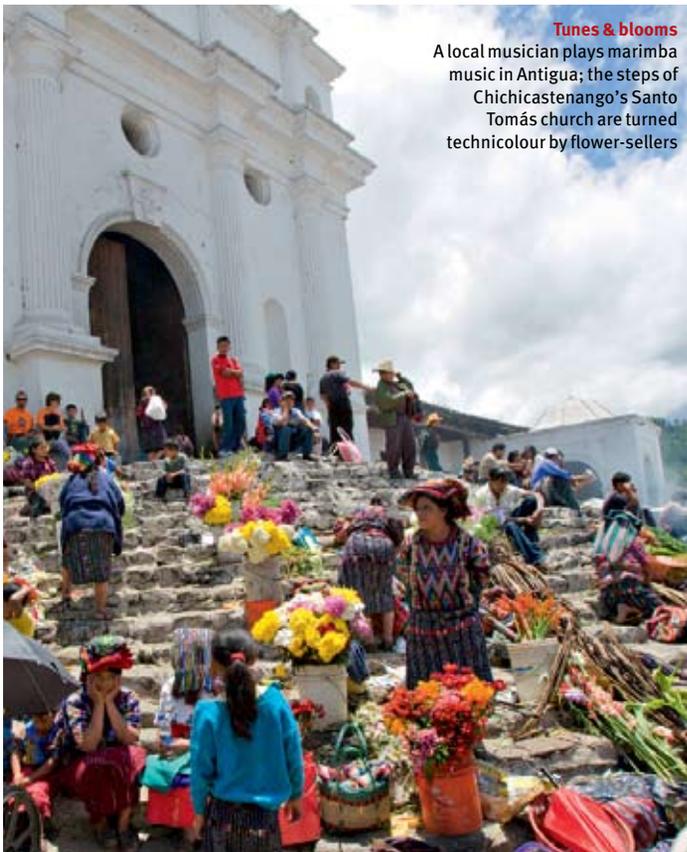
**2** Nourish your creative spirit with **carpet-making, altar creation, botanical art, photography and painting lessons**. The inventive Art Workshops in Antigua offers eight-day courses (from US\$1,795/£1,160, including accommodation; +502 7832 6403, [www.artguat.org](http://www.artguat.org)).

**3** The **marimba**, similar to a xylophone with large wooden keys, has a wonderful timbre; you'll hear it at fiestas. Aspiring percussionists should head to classes at **Xela's Minerva School** to learn with a local who makes and plays the instrument (US\$10/£6.45/hour; +502 7767 4427, [www.minervaspanshishschool.com](http://www.minervaspanshishschool.com)).

**4** Xela is a less touristy town than Antigua, and actually a better language-learning centre. INEPAS is an excellent **Spanish-language school with top principles**: 15% of its income is devoted to local development projects. Classes can be accompanied by cultural programmes or a volunteer position, arranged through this non-profit school (from US\$110/£71 per week; +502 7765 1308, [www.inepas.org](http://www.inepas.org)).

**5** Support a **sustainable weaving company** that employs local Maya women, while threading your own fancy fabric. Weekly one-to-one classes at the women's weaving co-op Trama Textiles in Xela (Q35/£2.85 for one hour, Q975/£80 for a 30-hour course; +502 7765 8564, <http://tramatextiles.org>) teach you to create your own textiles or clothes.

**Never forget**  
The book *Nunca Más* (Never Again), by the Guatemalan Human Rights Office, details the horror of the civil war in which 200,000 people died; 83% were Maya



**Tunes & blooms**  
A local musician plays marimba music in Antigua; the steps of Chichicastenango's Santo Tomás church are turned technicolour by flower-sellers

## Maya encounters

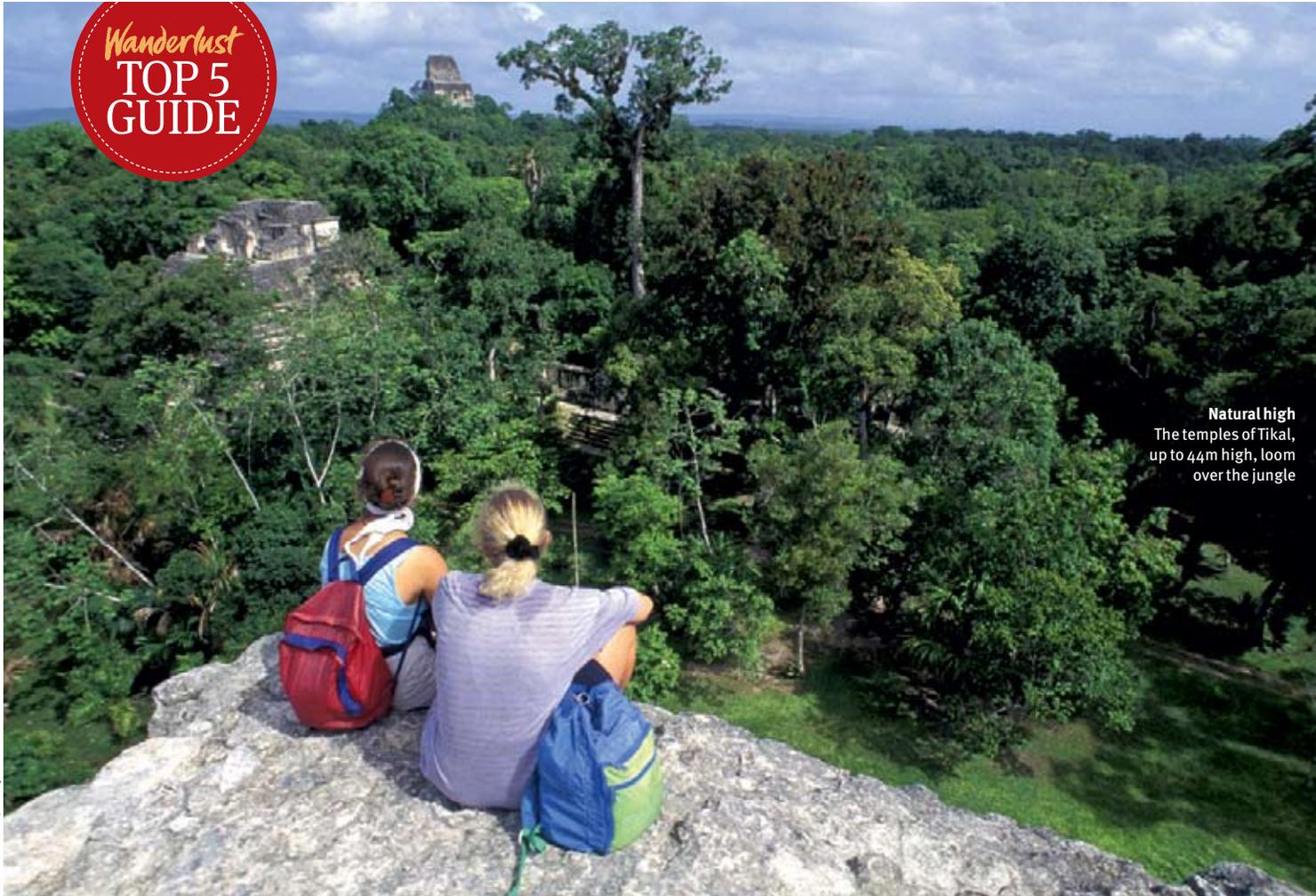
**1** **Kakchiquel Maya offer homestays** at San Jorge La Laguna village, perched on the edge of a cliff overlooking Lake Atitlán. Guests help prepare tortillas for dinner and share in community activities (US\$18/£11.60 half board; +502 7832 2509, [www.viaventure.com](http://www.viaventure.com)). Aventura Maya K'iche' (US\$60/£38.70; +502 5630 0554, [kiche78@hotmail.com](mailto:kiche78@hotmail.com)) offers a similar experience in Maya K'iche' homes in rural spots and in Totonicapán.

**2** A **cultural tour of colourful and fascinating Santiago Atitlán** with Tz'utujil Maya guide Dolores Ratzan (US\$35/£22.60 for four people; [www.posadadesantiago.com](http://www.posadadesantiago.com)) reveals the intricacies of a world that's difficult for outsiders to probe. Dolores speaks English.

**3** Learn about Maya cosmivision and **have your Maya horoscope read** by Maya priest Don Rigoberto at Takilibén Maya Wajshakib Batz (+502 7736 5537, [www.kachina.net/~alunajoy/wajshakib-batz.html](http://www.kachina.net/~alunajoy/wajshakib-batz.html)) in the highland town of Momostenango.

**4** In Guatemala City, explore the Museo Ixchel del Traje Indígena (6a Calle Final; Q35/£2.85; +502 2331 3622), the outstanding **museum of Maya clothing**, and the insightful and stuffed-full-of-Maya-artefacts Popul Vuh Archaeology Museum (6 Calle Final; Q35/£2.85; +502 2338 7896, [www.popolvuh.ufm.edu](http://www.popolvuh.ufm.edu)).

**5** The **church of Santo Tomás in Chichicastenango** bristles with Maya K'iche' worshippers, candles and incense; outside, flower sellers with their baskets of vibrant blooms crowd the steps – one of the most beautiful sights in Guatemala. Just outside town, on a pine-clad hill, locals come to the shrine of Pascual Abaj, a fertility god, for prayer and intercession. ▶



**Natural high**  
The temples of Tikal, up to 44m high, loom over the jungle

## Planning your trip

### ◀ **When to go**

November to April is peak time – it's dry season in the highlands. Most of the highlands are warm during the day and cool at night. Hurricanes and heavy rains affect Guatemala June–November. The biggest festival is Semana Santa (Easter Week) in Antigua; book accommodation well in advance.

### **Getting there**

There are no direct flights to Guatemala from the UK. Iberia (0870 609 0500, [www.iberia.com](http://www.iberia.com)) serves Guatemala City via Madrid; return fares for the 15-hour journey start at around £719. Other airlines fly from Miami or Houston for connecting flights from the UK.

### **Getting around**

Antigua's colonial core is easily explored on foot. Local 'chicken buses' (converted US school buses) connect towns in the Western Highlands, though the Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)) advises against

using them. Longer routes, such as Guatemala to Xela, are served by coach companies such as Linea Dorada ([www.lineadorada.info](http://www.lineadorada.info)) and tourist shuttles. Adrenalina Tours (<http://adrenalinatours.com/shuttles>) runs minibuses door to door all over the country. Boats operate from Panajachel to all lakeshore towns and villages.

### **Further reading & information**

**Central America & Mexico Handbook** (Footprint, 2009) is the most frequently updated guide to Guatemala  
**[www.xelapages.com](http://www.xelapages.com)** – all you need to know about Xela (Quetzaltenango)  
**[www.atitlan.com](http://www.atitlan.com)** – information covering the lake area  
**<http://revuemag.com>** – an English-language site with interesting articles  
**Guatemalan Maya Centre** (<http://web.ukonline.co.uk/maya>) in London has an excellent library and outstanding textile collection; visits by appointment ■



## Guatemala: other highlights

- 1 Maya pyramids** The glorious Maya sites of the Petén include majestic Tikal, monumental El Mirador, jade-topped Yaxhá, and exciting Dos Pilas and Aguateca
- 2 Northern waters** Sail through the Río Dulce canyon up to Livingston town for Caribbean coast, coconuts and chilling with the Garífuna folk
- 3 Stellar stelae** Quiriguá is a Late Classic period (AD 600–800) Maya ruin; the tallest stelae (ornately carved stones) in the Maya world tower over the site – the loftiest is 10.66m high
- 4 Limestone luxury** Bathe in the beautiful blue pools that pock-mark the 60m limestone bridge at Semuc Champey
- 5 Petén wildlife** Spot bats at El Zotz, spider and howler monkeys at Tikal, and scarlet macaws and white-lipped peccaries at El Perú